



Southeast Alaska Conservation Council

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via email to: DOT_STIP@dot.state.ak.us

Statewide Planning Office – Division of Program Development
3132 Channel Drive, Suite 200
Juneau, AK 99801-7898

To Whom It May Concern:

The following comments are submitted on behalf of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC) on the 2006-2008 Draft Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

SEACC is a coalition of eighteen volunteer citizen conservation groups in fourteen Southeast Alaska communities from Ketchikan to Yakutat. Our members include commercial and sport fishermen, hunters and guides, high value-added wood product manufacturers, Alaska Natives, and Alaskans from all walks of life. SEACC is dedicated to protecting the integrity of Southeast Alaska's unsurpassed natural environment, while providing for sound, sustainable use of our region's resources.

The environmental, economic, and social health of the region is closely linked to the transportation choices made by the state, particularly due to the unique geography of Southeast Alaska and the remote location of our communities.

While several vital transportation projects have been delayed or cancelled statewide, the following comments express concern with delayed or cancelled projects in Southeast Alaska.

For over forty years, the Alaska Marine Highway System has united the island communities of Southeast Alaska. Nine out of ten people who commented on a recent revision of the Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan said the ferry system should be the state's top priority. Unfortunately, many believe that the Murkowski Administration has deliberately taken steps to dismantle this critical link. The levels of funding for the ferry system in the draft STIP do little to dissuade Southeast Alaskans of this suspicion.

ALASKA SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FOREST DWELLERS, Point Baker • ALASKANS FOR JUNEAU • CHICHAGOF CONSERVATION COUNCIL, Tenakee
• FRIENDS OF BERNERS BAY, Juneau • FRIENDS OF GLACIER BAY, Gustavus • JUNEAU AUDUBON SOCIETY • JUNEAU GROUP SIERRA CLUB • LOWER CHATHAM CONSERVATION SOCIETY, Port Alexander • LYNN CANAL CONSERVATION, Haines • NARROWS CONSERVATION COALITION, Petersburg • LISIANSKI INLET RESOURCE COUNCIL, Pelican • PRINCE OF WALES CONSERVATION LEAGUE, Craig • SITKA CONSERVATION SOCIETY • TONGASS CONSERVATION SOCIETY, Ketchikan • TAKU CONSERVATION SOCIETY, Juneau • WRANGELL RESOURCE COUNCIL • YAKUTAT RESOURCE CONSERVATION COUNCIL

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Under the draft STIP, the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT) cancelled construction of a new terminal at Annette Bay, terminal mooring improvements for Pelican, and terminal modifications and improvements for Petersburg, Angoon, and Juneau. Additionally, the draft STIP dropped \$45 million for the *M/V LeConte* replacement, a vital improvement that was promised to the northern Southeast villages of Hoonah, Angoon, Tenakee, Pelican, and Kake. It also appears that the Southern Gateway shuttle and the mainline ferry replacement have been eliminated.

SEACC has always maintained that ferry service is the safest, most efficient, and least invasive way for people to travel throughout Southeast.

In addition to the impacts to the ferry system, the road system in Southeast Alaska was hit hard. Cancelled projects include, but are not limited to: reconstruction of over 20 miles of the Haines highway, totaling \$37.2 million; construction of a second crossing in Juneau, totaling \$68 million; Egan Drive improvements in Juneau, totaling over \$37.2 million; Tongass Avenue resurfacing and upgrading in Ketchikan, totaling \$15 million; and road resurfacing in Yakutat, totaling \$2.7 million.

Other important projects have been delayed in the STIP. These include, but are not limited to: upgrading the Sawmill Creek Road in Sitka, totaling \$9.8 million; improving the Lutak Road in Haines, totaling \$5 million; and improving the Egan Drive-Sunny Point intersection in Juneau, totaling \$20.5 million.

Southeast communities have asked for these projects and indeed have worked hard to move them up the State's priorities list. While our board has not taken official positions on many of these projects, SEACC believes that the STIP should reflect these community-supported needs instead of prioritizing controversial projects of questionable need.

In the face of the many STIP cancellations proposed, spending on the Gravina Bridge is unjustified. Recall that the department's July 2004 EIS estimated the bridge's total economic benefit for 30 years to be \$27.1 million, well below the total cost of \$315 million. Southeast Alaskans deserve a better prioritized transportation plan in order to maintain and improve their economies. For example, ferry service has always been a critical transportation option for our region. We support sections of the STIP that provide much needed funding for ferry projects. We urge the DOT to use this STIP to increase the funding to better match the ferry system's actual needs.

The project delays and cancellations caused by the Gravina Bridge funding are exacerbated by the STIP's \$178 million allocation to the Juneau Access project. SEACC strongly supports improved ferry service instead of wasting taxpayers dollars to extend this controversial dead end. As the DOT is well-aware, both Haines and Skagway oppose the road's construction. Over sixty percent of Skagway residents voted in favor of improved ferry service, and the city passed a resolution against the project, as did the Haines Borough. A majority of Juneau residents also voted to improve ferry service in a 2000 referendum vote.

There are ample reasons why so many citizens oppose the Juneau Access project. Motorists using the road would be vulnerable to avalanches in the winter and spring. The road would need to be closed as much as one month out of the year due to weather conditions. The latest plans for a 50 mile "dead end extension" will make travel times longer, all things being equal. The DOT's Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement also revealed that the road-shuttle ferry alternative would actually cost the State 45% more to maintain and operate over the long run than the existing ferry system. To illustrate the costs and hazards of constructing a road through Southeast's steep and winding terrain, consider the recent mudslides in Haines that caused over \$2 million in road damage. Furthermore, the road would be an eyesore for cruise ship and ferry passengers traveling up the Lynn Canal and leave an unnecessary environmental footprint in Berners Bay, an extremely high-value fish and wildlife area.

New mega-projects should not come at the expense of maintenance and repair of our existing road and ferry system. Road upkeep is vital to helping ensure the safety of motorists, bikers, and pedestrians. A "fix it first" policy goes hand in hand with a "safety first" principle.

We believe that the STIP should reflect transportation needs expressed by communities, rather than letting politics rule the day. We look forward to a new and improved STIP that addresses these needs.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Buck Lindekugel". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "B" and a long, horizontal stroke at the end.

Buck Lindekugel
Conservation Director